

Consequences of a World Online



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Youth on the Internet

by Randall C. Flanery, Ph.D.

The appropriate use of any new significant technology is a challenging matter and has always raised questions regarding its consequences for the individual and within the society. Just as people anguished about the harm that could result with the advent of the telephone, radio, or television, so are we worried about the social consequences of the Internet. We are especially concerned for our youth, who are the most frequent users of the Internet and who prefer text messaging, email, Snapchat, Twitter, and Social Networking Sites like Facebook, all of which are designed to make the exchange of personal information extremely easy.

The ostensible purpose of many of these Internet applications is to enhance human relationships. The combination of human nature and the compelling availability of the Internet lends itself to a time-consuming, compulsive submission to our devices, such that their use actually has the effect of diminishing human relationships. With increasing use, these devices can lead to loneliness, alienation, depression, and addiction. It is very hard for us humans to remain masters of the technology and not become its slaves.

Compulsive Use of Digital Devices

The use of the Internet by youth to conduct their personal business has become almost ubiquitous. In this essay, I will use the term “youth” to refer both to teenagers, age 13 to 17 years, and to young adults, 18 to 30 years. There are many differences related to the developmental stages of life of these two groups; as such, their appropriate use of digital technology will differ respectively. Individuals in both stages are transitioning from the emotional and financial dependence of adolescence, into becoming fully functioning, autonomous adults who have established their own households, are launched on a career, and have found a marriage partner. In both stages, the person is cultivating the habits and beliefs that will be the foundation for living their lives. Thus, an essential task for them is establishing relationships of all kinds.

Contemporary youth can hardly imagine maintaining a network of friends without the cell phone and social media sites. Seventy-five percent of teens and 93% of young adults own mobile phones. Nearly all adolescents and young adults go on line daily, the majority doing so more than a dozen times a day. To what purpose are they accessing the Internet? To obtain information, to acquire things, but definitely for social networking.

On the face of it, access to the Internet, and hence to SNS, is promoting frequent communication with friends. These friends are connected, at least superficially. The Internet transmits images and information almost instantaneously. You can readily post an image of the restaurant you are going to eat at, a selfie of you and your friend, a comment on the food, a comment on the friend, and a comment on the comments of your other friends. This communication has the appearance of a conversation. It appears to promote companionship; you certainly know a lot of details. But does it really enhance the relationship?

Diminishment of Personal Relationships

Sherry Turkle, a clinical psychologist and a long time researcher of the use and misuse of computer technology for human purposes, has documented¹ that reliance on modern digital communication has damaged human relationships. We are substituting “sips” of Internet communication via texts, tweets, Facebook updates, and emails for authentic human-to-human conversation. Convinced by the immediacy and volume of personal information exchanged, and believing that multitasking is actually efficient, “We turn to our phones instead of each other,” with insidious interpersonal consequences.

The specific consequences are that we can no longer sustain attention to one another and that we are losing the capacity to be empathic, thereby degrading human relationships in the process. Turkle sees the proper process of conversing, which is a key to cultivating relationships, as a “virtuous circle” in which we reflect within ourselves, “alone with our thoughts,” which prepares us to talk to others. Self-reflection then leads to conversation in which both parties attend carefully to what is said, how it is said, and what is not said. Essential to the process is empathy, which encompasses one’s being able to imagine the world from another’s perspective and to conceive how the other is thinking and feeling, even if it is not fully articulated. Out of these conversations comes new material, new content to be considered in solitude, which will broaden and deepen our understanding of ourselves and others. An unintended consequence of the ubiquitous availability of digital communication technology, a technology most highly utilized by adolescents and young adults, is that while being connected 24/7, we truly know each other less well, and if we do not exercise prudence about the use of this technology, we will end up lonely and alienated.

Most youth go online multiple times a day, every day, and spend several hours a day on online activities. Youth are even sacrificing their sleep, in order to spend more time “connecting.” When connecting, you are not performing other human activities, including wholeheartedly attending to the person in front of you.

Adolescents are notorious for not wanting to converse with adults, except when they want to, and then only as long as they want to. Even before smartphones

they had ways to exclude themselves from everyone else. The smartphone is always available, even in the middle of an undesirable conversation. Furthermore, there is nothing like a head down over a phone to shout “Don’t talk to me, I am busy!”

And parents with their own phones are not helping. I am sure you have experienced someone damaging a relationship with you by turning to their phone, mid-sentence. I would wager that you have done the same.

A teenager comes rushing into the home, wanting to tell Mom about the events of the day. Mother is perusing the latest Facebook postings, or searching Pinterest for a chicken recipe.

“Mom?”

“Mom....?”

“Mom?”

“In a minute, dear.”

More requests for undivided parental attention, also ignored. The youth starts texting her friends, and she has over 500 on Facebook.

Later, Dad comes rushing in for dinner, taking a business call as he walks through the door. Finally, Dad arrives at the table, placing the phone directly in front of him. Everyone knows that there will be more calls, and Dad must check the baseball score, and arrange a tee-off time. The mere presence of a phone at the table will dampen conversation. Fortunately, the kids are no longer bothered; they have their earbuds in, accessing the Internet. It never turns a deaf ear.

Consider for a moment, what is pushed away to spend several hours a day digitally communicating: Sleep? A phone beside the bed will delay sleep by 30 minutes or more, and your day will start earlier with the first notification you get, always before the alarm rings.^[L]_{SEP}] Meals? Breakfast and lunch are multitasking opportunities to update statuses, find out where your acquaintances are, arrange to meet, or simply chat. The volume of information sent and received, the presumed efficiency of multi-tasking, obscures an essential reality: with increasing connection, there is greater loneliness, and an inability to tolerate being alone.

Yes, you are connected, but do you know what your texting partner is thinking? Or feeling? What is not being said among the many words? Seventy percent of

what is communicated derives from how it is said, what is implied, and various nonverbal gestures, none of which will be found in an email or a “like” or a status update.

Quick, superficial, frequent. Easy snippets of adulterated communication is driving out actual conversation, which can only occur face to face, which takes time, and which requires single-minded attention to the other person, followed later by reflection upon what was said. If you can no longer attend fully to the person across from you, how will you be able to reflect upon your own thoughts?

Internet Addiction

A sad paradox of ubiquitous access to the Internet is that while it is destroying authentic relationships and creating loneliness, the answer to this situation for the compulsive Internet user is to access the Internet even more. Some paltry quality of connection is better than nothing; perhaps having a whole lot of it will finally be satisfying.

Internet Addiction is a newly identified disorder that is considered to be a behavioral addiction. Many ordinary human behaviors can be used addictively: shopping, gambling, sex, for example. Any behavior that produces an immediate positive feeling can become compulsive when used repeatedly to escape from the unpleasant. Unrestricted access to the pleasures of the Internet is most certainly compulsive.

Adolescents and young adults are especially vulnerable to Internet Addiction, given their almost universal use of digital technology. Indications that use of the Internet has become addictive are: increasing use in order to feel satisfied, unable to limit or control use, jeopardizing friend and family relationships, interfering with job or academic performance, concealing the amount of time spent, and using it excessively as means of escape from difficulties and to alleviate dysphoric mood such as depression, guilt, or anxiety. By this definition, up to ten percent of American adolescents and young adults are addicted to using the Internet.

While many use the Internet to bring joy, nothing gladdens me like pictures of grandchildren or snarky jokes sent to me. But for many others, it does not elevate mood, but rather deflates it. Aggressively pursuing connection via the Internet, *i.e.*, spending ever increasing hours online is associated with depression. While the reasons have not been fully explicated yet, one likely factor is that human interaction is reduced, leading to isolation and alienation, which are fertile emotional states for depression. Another factor is due to social comparison. All humans examine those around them, and compare themselves

in order to draw conclusions about their own personal well-being. Since social networking users will likely post only the best and brightest moments of their lives and not the mundane, boring or disappointing, by comparison my life is dull, as am I. A full picture of human life cannot be obtained via Facebook; to get that you would have to engage in a real conversation.

More alarming is that public health officials have begun to notice a previously unidentified group of adolescents at risk for depression, anxiety disorders, and suicide. This at-risk group is characterized by reduced sleep, low physical activity, and high use of social media. Ominously, they are mostly overlooked by adults because these characteristics do not show obvious.

What Can Parents Do?

Parents can do a number of things, none of which are easy. The first, the biggest, and the most difficult is for the parents or significant adults to model the appropriate Catholic use of digital technology. By that I mean to show how to use a created technological tool for a good end. The authentic connection to another human being is a far greater good than is fact-checking, multitasking, updating statuses, or posting the latest cute picture of your cat, your dinner, or your current do-it-yourself project. Any other measure which might be attempted will be seriously undermined if you can't put your own phone away.

Be a wise-minded, assertive parent. Monitor and limit what is introduced into your home. Decide what devices may be used, how much, and how often. Monitor and censor the content. Use technology to block certain sites and to monitor what the youth is doing on the device. Some software can generate a list of sites visited. Print the list and review with the user. Consider whether you want your adolescent even to have a smartphone before he or she graduates from high school.

Schedule digital device free time each week. For example, agree as a family when to put all devices away and for particular activities like meals. Don't allow the youth to take the device to their room in the evening or to even leave by the bed.

And please don't despair. If you become discouraged you might abandon the effort and end up abdicating your responsibilities to limit exposure to soul-endangering activities. By not attempting to counter the harm you see, you are allowing the contemporary peer culture to dictate what is acceptable for your child to do. Obviously, the attempt will require persistence and resourcefulness.

While it is challenging, I believe parents can at least be a voice against the harmful use of the digital technology. Other technological advances have posed

similar challenges, and have been put to good uses. I trust that this technology will be mastered as well.

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Comprehensive information on the use social media can be found in the Pew Report, for example: “Teens, Technology and Friendships”: www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/06.

1 Turkle, Sherry. *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. Penguin Press, New York, New York.

The Screen Teen

Extracts from Fr. Boubée’s study, *Modern Technologies... from superman to the cave man*

“That little kid is so smart; you should see him on his computer!”

“I got mine a touch-screen tablet for Christmas.” This commonplace conversation between two mothers is going on while the children focus their lively attention on their little Game Boy, unless they are in the process of sending one of their 50 daily text messages.

The last sixty years have witnessed an astonishing evolution in the tools we use every day. In particular, the world of the electronic screen has made its way into our manner of knowing, our way of communicating, our professional relations, our leisure time, and in many cases, it has become the very foundation of our judgment.

All technology brings with it new and marvelous possibilities in which we are allowed to partake. But an honest analysis will allow us to draw the line between the *admirable*, the *useful*, and the *harmful*.

The Human Way of Life

Man is wonderfully structured to attain the highest forms of understanding.

- His senses allow him direct contact with the world around him, and the intellect is thereby able to grasp the nature of things;
- As man grapples with that reality, he can then assemble his ideas, compose them, and link them together. These ideas lead him to make practical and prudent judgments;
- the role of man's will, based on these judgments, is then to move toward the good;
- the perfection of the will's movement is called love;
- the will is meant to regulate the emotions or passions in order to keep them from being as disordered as they would otherwise be, given our fallen nature;
- so structured in this way, man aims at his own perfection, all in respecting that order willed by the Creator which is called *morality*; what is noblest in morality is in fact a form of love which is called *charity*.

These points show how man functions. But the massive presence of new electronic technology has considerably altered these elementary rhythms of man's psychology; so much so that each one of these points calls for its own treatment.

The Cyber Mind Faces a New Mode of Operation

The widespread arrival of television in the home marked a very clear fault line. We could place that turning point at about 1960. Up until then, man was used to knowing reality as it is, taking it *in*, directly from its source, and then exercising his judgment. That contact with reality necessarily set the passions in motion: but sentiments arose at a human rhythm. Education and experience taught man how to use his reason to regulate those emotions.

Now, with the advent of the television, man was suddenly faced with a massive bombardment of pictures generated on the screen. These pictures are specifically moving and thus they possess a particular power of fascination. This bombardment of pictures hyper-activates the emotions, set off by partial glimpses of reality that are all the more deceptive the more realistic the picture.

This omnipresence of images from the screen frustrates the operation of the intellect: generally speaking, the sensibility steps in and replaces it. The process of coming to know is thereby gravely affected. The day-to-day functioning of the child—and later the adult—is thereby atrophied. The diminution of the operation of the intellect has become a common phenomenon, this inability to

understand, to judge, to look at reality in perspective, to affirm one's personality.

The intellect of modern man is being dragged back to a kind of primitivism in which emoting replaces concrete reasoning or thinking.

Reality the Way We Want It

The computer came twenty-five years after the television, bringing the possibility for a person to "intervene" in the picture produced on the screen. This intervention happens on very small surfaces, in a simplified manner, and through a person's fingertips. It cannot be compared to man's intervention in reality when he approaches and observes a scene before him. What he sees on the screen is no longer life in the concrete, sensible world around him, but only a very fragmentary picture of that world.

Two novelties arise:

- That portion of man which intervenes in this computer world is not the whole being, with all of his members, and all of his personality.
- The intervention itself no longer entails any physical correlation to or responsibility over a real event: with what devastating ease do children grow accustomed to killing on a screen, or adults to plunging themselves into morally despicable situations. (We are speaking of physical responsibility: there always remains a moral responsibility before God, for the quality of an action as good or bad.)

Man is drawn even more radically out of reality. His behavior is dictated by the imagination.

The Eradication of Genuine Thought

How many children and even how many adults start writing before they start thinking, and the result is a kaleidoscope of disconnected statements.

All the more so when culture amounts to an Internet cut-and-paste. Many of the assignments given by teachers are really asking for a monstrous caricature of knowledge, since the final product never went through the intellect. No abstraction took place, no comprehension, no judgment in the intellectual sense of the word. How could there be any synthesis, or any rigorous analysis of the essential points of a given topic?

For the older generation, the ever-expanding bazaar of forums, blogs, and other points of exchange on the Internet is, unfortunately, more a kind of zoo because of this absence of reflective thought.

A False Construction of Personality Through the Game

In the natural order of things, the child or the adolescent prepares himself for his future life as an adult in many ways, and games hold a predominant place among those ways. Games immerse the child in a universe that is “like real life,” a kind of unreal reality, if we may use that contrast.

For young people especially, their whole being is involved in the game: body, emotions, intellect, and judgment. In a way, they are digesting the enormous amount of information that they have received and they are testing it out in the real world. Even in the gentlest organized game, like a board game, or in a more elaborate and exciting one, like a soccer match, the whole personality is involved: but here we mean *the real personality, in a real world*.

Computer games, game consoles, and little electronic games tear young people out of the true perception of reality through sense and intellect, and plunge them into the entirely unreal. These modern players step into the picture, but not into the real world, through an intense and nearly exclusive use of certain senses. The way the players throw themselves into the game is by reconstructing themselves inside a world that has nothing to do with the one that they are called to live in.

These games, therefore, do not serve the purpose of constructing their personalities for the future, as would the traditional games construct the genuine, legitimate behavior of a child.

What is more, the nervous system is thrown off balance in these games by so much jerking around of the attention, the jolts and shocks, the constant flashes of light, and the situations that are often violent.

People Present Who Really Aren't Present

The modern world seems to be opening onto a vast field of communication and friendships, or so it appears: the bitter irony is that the contrary is actually the case. Notice that when our modern “techies” are standing right next to you, they are in the process of communicating with someone else who is totally absent from the scene. These individuals who are not present intrude their false presence, while individuals who are truly present on the scene are ignored and become like strangers. So ultimately, people who are absent are always present,

and people who are present are always absent! This schizoid-like orientation to one's surroundings is indeed somewhat unsettling.

Two people have just said goodbye, and yet they are immediately calling each other on their cell-phones. Instead of waiting for the next day, two friends communicate at every moment the events of their family life, the emotions they are feeling, whatever is passing through their minds. Inconstancy of thought and impulsiveness become second nature.

In addition, it is becoming impossible to have the effects of normal relationships—charity, friendship, patience, or even education. Relationships are no longer only with people who are present: there is always an unknown “third party” to be considered. For example, a parent scolds one of his children, and the child can immediately turn and complain to someone else through use of the cell phone; in doing so, the child loses all the fruits of that time of necessary reflection on the parent's words—first in the order of his passions, then little by little in the order of reason. He loses that value bestowed on the personality, which is called education.

False Friendships

At the other end of the spectrum, friendship has another omnipresent new form: all the chains of communication that push young people into relationships with the most people possible, in order to share every *superficial* detail of their lives.

Are they really friends? No, it is not possible for them to be friends: a friend is someone you spend time with.

- True friendships are founded primarily on time genuinely spent together, and not through a screen or through trivial messages sent back and forth.
- Friends are by necessity few in number.
- But most of all, it is the friend who discovers who you are, not you showing yourself off. In these days of “posting,” a person declares himself to be as he would like to appear. A person is basically creating an artificial character for himself.

Rarely in their postings do young people hurriedly proclaim their virtue, because it is easier and gains more notoriety to advertise the unhealthy things, or sinful things, or barriers you have dared to exceed.

There is a kind of unhealthy sensationalism in these friendships: “He dared...,” “He did this...” “She dresses this way...,” “He has this girlfriend...”. There are those many spheres in which the delicacy of the personality learns to recognize what is appropriate to tell and what is inappropriate to tell in the various given

circumstances. But in this system, everything becomes public, even the little daily events that should never enter into the particular communication.

We are encountering a gradual loss of all sense: loss of judgment; loss of reserve; loss of good sense; loss of politeness; loss of the meaning of family and friendship. The damage is huge. Certainly, there are cases in which an expansive network of communication is able, by good fortune, to do good in easing someone's suffering...but at the price of how many other communications and friendships destroyed!

In Comes Google, Out Goes the Mind

by Fr. Dominique Bourmaud, SSPX

The first time I felt uneasy about the “black box,” my first laptop computer, was when my friend Raymond, a self-taught programmer, started tapping nervously on the keyboard, bringing out flashes of information on the screen. This was hardly human behavior. Either Ray had lost his mind or this was his way of relaxing his tight nerves.

Just Another Technological Discovery?

It is common knowledge that civilization adapts to technology and that modern inventions deeply affect human behaviors. It is easy indeed to see the change in culture produced by the various modifications of human language alone, that vital vehicle of thought. Major changes occurred, for example: from the unwritten story of blind Homer, who could remember a 20,000 line *Illiad*, to the same poem couched on papyrus 700 years later as a written text in scriptura continua “withnobreakandallinone”; continuing changes occurred from the uninterrupted text, to the separate words and sentences; and further changes continued from the hand-written manuscripts, to Guttenberg's printed books. Man's mind has certainly gone through new modes of thinking and processing words as human language became fixed, perfected, and multiplied indefinitely. Can we say the same of the latest human invention, the Internet? A 2010 New York Times Best Seller, *The Shallows*, written by Nicholas Carr (W. W. Norton and Cy, New York), squarely addresses the question.

One of the first modern computer experiments was shown at Xerox's Research Center of Palo Alto in the mid-1970s. The presenter demonstrated the flexibility of the system of “multitasking” by having several windows on the screen. On one of them, he was composing software code. He then clicked on another which displayed a newly arrived e-mail message. He quickly read and replied to the message, then hopped back to the programming window and continued

working. While most of the audience applauded warmly the feat, someone angrily exclaimed, “Why in the world would you want to be interrupted—and distracted—by e-mail while programming?”

This is a question few teenagers will ever raise today. “I click, therefore, I am” is their motto and, incidentally, the cause of much stress. Teens and young adults need to know details of the lives of their peers, coupled with a terrific anxiety about being out of the loop. If they stop sending messages, they risk becoming invisible. That is why, in 2010, the average teenager was spending more than 11 hours a day connected to some social media.

The advocates of the Web praise it for its ability to “conduct 34 conversations simultaneously across six different media.” They hope that this “technology-induced ADD” will develop new cognitive habits...“to navigate the age of constant connectivity.” Leaving room for the hyperbolic twist, there is little doubt that the average computer user is beginning to function like a PC, categorizing and assessing bits of information, with speed and disorder. In this jungle law of the “survival of the busiest” brain cells, the battle is lost by those cells that support linear thought, the ones we use in traversing a lengthy narrative or an involved argument, the ones we draw on when we contemplate things.

Deep Mind Boggling

Carr’s best seller is riddled with brain studies on neurons and synapses which are as revealing as they are intriguing. We learn that the nervous system is endowed with great plasticity which allows it to adapt to behavior and environment. But plasticity does not mean elasticity. The paths of least resistance become the vital paths, and they tend to lock us into a rigid behavior, crossing the point of no return. It can have pathological repercussions, with some unsweetened names like depression or obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Knowing what we know today about the brain’s plasticity, if one were to set out to invent a medium that would drastically rewire our mental circuits, one would probably end up designing something like the Internet. Repetitive, interactive, addictive stimuli will produce rapid alterations in brain circuits. Chemical changes will become anatomical changes. Said simply: they create different brains.

Just as neurons that fire together wire together, neurons that don’t fire together don’t wire together. What we’re not doing when we’re online has also a momentous impact. It stifles the time we spend composing sentences and paragraphs, devoted to quiet reflection and contemplation. The circuits that

support those old intellectual functions and pursuits weaken and begin to break apart. The brain has to recycle the disused synapses for more pressing work.

And what is this work more pressing than thinking and reading? Book readers have a lot of activity in regions associated with language, memory, and visual processing, but little activity associated with decision making and problem solving. Experienced Net users, by contrast, display extensive activity across the brain region of the prefrontal cortex when they search Web pages. The need to evaluate links and make navigational choices, while sustaining fleeting sensory stimuli (photos, videos, moving items), requires steady mental coordination and decision making. This is distracting the brain from the plain interpreting of a text. To understand the juggling this involves, just imagine reading a book while doing a crossword puzzle; that's the intellectual environment of the Internet.

At that moment, another problem is added which impairs proper thinking. The short-term memory, called working memory, can suffer from overload. If this occurs, we become unable to distinguish relevant from irrelevant information, and thus we turn into a virtual zombie. Now, it is notorious that two of the most important sources of overload are extraneous problem-solving and divided attention, two central features of the Net. And, to top it all, some say that brain overtaxing is connected with ADD.

The Conditions for Deep Thinking?

The art of book reading is dwindling. Proper readers, a species in danger of extinction, would disengage their attention from the passing stimuli in order to engage it more deeply with an inward flow of words, ideas, and emotions. The reading of a sequence of pages is valuable not only for the knowledge they acquired from the author's words. These very words also set off their minds to prolong the process, to connect with images and work out the imagination and past experiences and analogies, and, finally, to create their own ideas and inferences. Adept readers think deeply as they read deeply.

For deep thinking, it is also known that getting away from the problem, taking a walk in the woods and "sleeping over it," allows the brain to become calmer and sharper. This is because the brain can relax and disengage without taxing the working memory. Contemplation and peace are vital as they rejuvenate the cells and prepare them for the next mental exercise.

Scientist Nielsen conducted an eye-tracking study of Web users in order to study the way the average online reader reads. The results were staggering. The vast majority skimmed the text quickly, their eyes skipping down the page in a pattern that resembled the letter F. F is for fast. In a few seconds the users read

your precious content and move on after an average of four seconds per page! Users, including the academic researchers, are “power-browsing” and are going for quick wins. They do not read in the traditional sense. Quantity is gained at the expense of quality, and, paradoxically, the broadening of available information is leading to a narrowing of science.

Finally, the provisional nature of digital text is fast influencing writing styles. A printed book is a finished product. Most conscientious writers were anxious to perfect the works they produced with an eye towards eternity. Electronic text is subject to ongoing revision: it becomes cheap in more ways than one. This is best illustrated by the history of correspondence in the last 30 years. In letter writing, formality and eloquence have been sacrificed to Chronos—the god of time.

Tool of Forgetfulness

What determines what we remember? The key to memory consolidation is attentiveness. For a memory to persist the incoming information must be thoroughly and deeply processed. This means attending to the information and associating it meaningfully and systematically with something already stored in the memory. If unable to attend to it, the information lasts as long as the neuron’s electric charge: a few seconds at best. But the Net users want to be entertained “in real time,” and want to be interrupted right now. It may not be wrong to conclude with Carr that “the Web makes our brains adept at forgetting, inept at remembering.”

Socrates prophesied the advent of a tool to “implant forgetfulness, a recipe not for memory, but for reminder.” Google co-founder Sergey Brin stated: “Certainly if you had all the world’s information directly attached to your brain, or an artificial brain that was smarter than your brain, you’d be better off.”

This point deserves a second thought. Would we really be better off without our personal memory? While surfing the web, we are sacrificing the wealth of connections within our own mind which, chemically but also anatomically, produce the synapses and physically build up memory. Online users do not gain memory the way deep readers and thinkers do, they only gain access to an electronic outside memory. The Web’s connections are not our connections. The thoughts, unless properly processed, are not our thoughts and will never define us. Richard Foreman eloquently explained the stakes:

“I come from a tradition of Western culture in which the ideal was the complex, dense and ‘cathedral-like’ structure of the highly educated and articulate personality. I see within us a new kind of self, evolving under the pressure of information overload and the technology of the ‘instantly available.’ We are

drained of our ‘inner repertory of dense cultural inheritance and risk turning into pancake people.’ ”

Redefining Man

Google founder Larry Page, in a 2007 conference to scientists, expressed his view of human life and human intellect:

“My theory is that if you look at your programming, your DNA, it’s about 600 megabytes compressed, so it’s smaller than any modern operating system, smaller than Linux or Windows... So your program algorithms probably aren’t that complicated: [intelligence] is probably more about overall computation.”

To him, the brain does not just resemble a computer; it is a computer. For Google, intelligence is the faculty of processing data, and we are approaching the “happy” day when the machine will create intelligence. Google’s dream is perhaps simply a boyish desire to create a cool machine that will be able to outthink its creators. However, the problem lies deeper. It consists of the dwarf conception of what a man is, with his depth of thought, creativity and emotion, and human decisions which define him.

Some say Google is God. Others say Google is Satan. On this theological note, Marshall McLuhan, the man who prophesied the advent of the Web and coined the aphorism “the medium is the message,” had this to say of the electronic world: “It nourishes the illusion that the world is a spiritual substance, a reasonable facsimile of the Mystical Body, an absorbing manifestation of the antichrist. After all, the Prince of this world is a great electronic engineer.”

One scientist tested the relation between multitasking and creativity and inventiveness. The results were clear. The more you multitask, the less deliberative and able you are to reason out a problem. Once you face the screen, you are hard pressed to think outside the box. The constant shifting of your attention when online hampers your ability to think deeply and creatively. Internauts are shallow thinkers because they have no time to challenge incoming ideas. As a rule, one is never as good as when he focuses on one thing at a time, or, in the word of Seneca: “To be everywhere is to be nowhere.”

Another Latin poet, Lucretius, seemed to have had the Net users in mind when he wrote: “They taste from the mouth of others; they search things from hearsay rather than from their own senses.” Being in the clutches of the spider’s Web, we utterly disconnect from the outer world. This is bound to alter the behavior since what is most human is what is least computable about us, that is to say, connections between our mind and our body, experiences that shape our memory and our thinking, our capacity for emotion and empathy. And such

things cannot happen in a flash time. “If things are happening too fast, you may not ever fully experience emotions about other people’s psychological states.” Frenzied technology feeds frenzied souls, and frenzied souls can hardly be acting humanly.

It is certain that the Net era is seeing profound revolutionary changes in man’s behavior. The challenge we face is to preserve our human personality, created in the image of God and redeemed by Christ. The Net challenge is to not sacrifice our own souls on the altar of the new god of utter distraction, forgetfulness, and mindlessness.